



Connecticut Association of Conservation and Inland Wetlands Commissions, Inc.

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TESTIMONY TO THE CONNECTICUT GENERAL ASSEMBLY, GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING on Monday, March 14, 2016

The Connecticut Association of Conservation and Inland Wetlands Commissions, Inc. (CACIWC) is pleased to submit testimony in support of the following bill:
Senate Joint Resolution No. 36 RESOLUTION PROPOSING AN AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE STATE TO PROTECT CERTAIN PROPERTY HELD OR CONTROLLED BY THE STATE FOR CONSERVATION, RECREATION, OPEN SPACE OR AGRICULTURAL PURPOSES.

CACIWC has long been supportive of efforts to permanently preserve important habitats in Connecticut, especially those lands of high conservation value. Our member conservation commissions endeavor to identify, index, and preserve critical habitats within their municipalities. Both forested and native grassland open space parcels have always ranked high among the various types of critical habitats that have been a focus of Connecticut conservation commission preservation efforts. Unfortunately, despite these efforts, many important parcels have become more fragmented over time. This trend has resulted in fewer large regional forest parcels and greenways, which decreases their value as sustaining habitats for various wildlife species. Many Connecticut year-round resident and migratory species are impacted by the loss of both of these unique parcels and important forest tracks.

One unexpected and alarming cause of preserved habitat fragmentation are the increasing number of proposals to transfer sections or parcels of state parks and forested lands in recent State of Connecticut Conveyance Acts. Many of these conveyances are proposed without consideration of the true conservation value of the targeted parcels. Since property transfers conducted by these acts do not require state or local public hearings; local conservation commissions, environmental organizations, or conservation-minded residents may not have an opportunity to provide testimony outlining the potential ecological loss that may result from these transfers.

While state conservation lands are not directly managed by local conservation commissions, these parcels all add to the greater network of preserved land necessary to maintain critical habitats that can support a diversity of species. Our state parks are an important part of our natural heritage and provide opportunities for our all of residents to enjoy and experience the beauty of our natural environment. The importance of providing preservation in perpetuity for state, municipal, and privately owned lands with critical forest habitats cannot be understated. Some of these lands may also have value to help improve Connecticut

resilience to climate change. Efforts to improve legal protection for maintaining high value conservation lands in perpetuity, will also maintain confidence that sold or donated lands will remain preserved. Moreover, a constitutional amendment designed to better protect public lands will renew the faith of landowners who are considering donating their lands that these properties will remain protected for the enjoyment of future generations.

The costs resulting from the conveyance of these state lands is not only limited to their loss as important habitats and recreational lands. CACIWC has long been a supporter of reclassification of lands for tax assessment purposes under P.A. 490. Use of already burdened staff within the State of Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) to evaluate land under P.A. 490 and reclassify lands subject to conveyance can also be avoided with the protection of a constitutional amendment.

Statewide land preservation efforts will be strengthened with the passage of S.J. No. 36, which will continue the process leading to a state constitutional amendment to strictly control attempts to sell or convey existing state parks, forest, and wildlife management areas. CACIWC strongly supports inclusion in the amendment requirements that would prohibit conveyances without first: considering the potential transfer or use change of each parcel in a separate bill, holding public hearings in the municipalities where the lands are located, requiring a 2/3 majority vote or higher level of approval by the Connecticut General Assembly, and if approved, requiring compensation for the loss of any parcel that equals or exceeds the true fair market value of the land. Monies realized from these transfers should be set aside in a dedicated "lock-box" fund for use in purchasing other lands within the region that have similar value for a conservation or passive recreation use.

The proposed bill would be improved by language stating that expenses associated with holding a public hearing and determining the fair market value of the land should be borne by the proposed new landholder; while final approval of the fair market value should be made by the state agency currently holding the land under consideration.

With the Connecticut ***State Parks Centennial*** celebration still fresh in our memory, CACIWC believes that the time is right to expand our toolkit for preserving our state's natural heritage. CACIWC is honored to lend its support to the efforts of the CGA Government Administration and Elections Committee to help permanently preserve the varied and important land that make up our state parks and forested land. In doing so, you not only protect important habitats, but help preserve the character of Connecticut.

CACIWC is a non-profit organization working to protect Connecticut's wetlands, watercourses, and other natural resources through support and education of the 2000+ volunteers and staff that carry out the responsibilities of Connecticut's Conservation Commissions and Inland Wetlands Commissions. CACIWC, representing its member commissions, works with municipalities and environmental groups to promote public support for the judicious management and conservation of Connecticut's natural resources. For additional information contact Alan J. Siniscalchi, President at board@caciwc.org or visit www.caciwc.org.